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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000219

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: BELARUS' INDEPENDENT MEDIA: DOWN BUT NOT OUT

REF: 05 MINSK 1193

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Several independent websites and newspapers each reach thousands of Belarusians despite the GOB's continued use of time-tested harassment methods to disrupt the flow of objective information. The regime has also employed new tactics, such as requiring newspapers to assist the state tax service in collecting information on advertisers. GOB pressure causes editors to carefully consider articles on certain sensitive subjects before deciding whether to print them. Most independent media editors reported that the cadre of independent journalists in Belarus has shrunk, and higher wages offered by other employers make it difficult to attract and retain talented staff. All independent media publications noted that they struggle with outdated and broken equipment. End summary.
Most Popular Publications

¶2. (SBU) We recently spoke with editors from the following independent media outlets:

Online:	Hits per day:
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TUT.by	45-75,000
Belapan	8-9,000
Charter 97	6-9,000
Solidarnost	1-2,000

Print:	Circulation:
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Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP)	50,000
BelGazeta	22,000
Svobodny Novosty NC Plus	17,000
Narodnaya Volya (NV)	11,000

----- Methods and Instances of GOB Harassment -----

GOB Denies Independent Media Access to State Monopolies

¶3. (SBU) The GOB maintains a monopoly over printing and vending services(Belsoyuzdruk), and mail distribution (Belpochta)(reftel). KP and BelGazeta remain the only independent newspapers with access to all three government monopolies, and private Russian companies own at least a majority share in both these papers. Currently, the GOB allows Svobodnyye Novosti to use its vendors. However, before the government will sell them, the editor must use an

independent company to print the papers and then personally deliver them to the central vending distribution center.

¶4. (C) In 2005 NV lost all access to GOB monopolies on printing, distribution and vending. NV now prints its papers in Smolensk, Russia, and transports them to Belarus. Volunteers then distribute them throughout Minsk and mail them to those living outside the capital. This increases the cost and lengthens the time of delivery. In 2005 Solidarnost was told that it could no longer use Belpochta or Belsoyuzdruk. The paper determined that private distribution was too expensive, so today it appears exclusively online.

Legal Harassment

¶5. (C) Belarusian law requires online media sources and any newspaper printing more than 299 copies to legally register with the government and maintain a legal address. Many buildings in Belarus remain government-owned. The GOB commonly refuses to lease space, breaks leases soon after signing them, and pressures private owners to break their leases with the independent media. Belapan Editor-in-Chief Ales Lypai related to Poloff that after purchasing a space outright, the local authorities in Minsk refused to register his publication at that address. When his lawyer filed a lawsuit concerning the matter, the government acquiesced. Lypai also reported that the local authorities in the Gomel District refused to register one of his journalists because a state journalist had already registered with them.

¶6. (C) Independent media can only obtain official GOB announcements from unofficial, personal contacts within the government. However, on February 22, the GOB apparently disseminated a confidential letter to all government agencies ordering directors to control public statements (interviews, articles) to the media, including non-state outlets. Any government source whose comments appear in the media and

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which contain "biased" or "incorrect" information about the economy will face disciplinary action or termination. Svetlana Kalinkina, editor of NV, reported that many independent journalists fear that this new restriction will completely end their access to first-hand government information.

Internet Media Harassment

¶7. (SBU) Online media outlets must also maintain a legal address, and so face some of the same problems as print media. However, they also have their own unique challenges. While it intensifies during elections, 'hacking' of independent media websites remains a constant problem. Once a site becomes 'hacked' users find it very difficult to access. During elections the GOB will also disconnect or block office phone lines, forcing journalists to use personal cell phones or laptops to communicate with the home office.

¶8. (SBU) On February 10, the Belarusian Council of Ministers issued a new directive that requires internet cafes to maintain records of all websites their customers visit and grant the BKGB access to these records upon request. Reporters Without Borders noted that cyber cafes were the "last resort for anyone wanting to post critical news without risk of arrest," as the GOB has a monopoly on internet access through the company Beltelekom.

Economic Harassment

¶9. (C) In 2005 the GOB began using a tactic aimed at the economic base of the independent media. The GOB drastically increased the price of TV listings, but granted state-sponsored newspapers a significant discount. Regional subscribers expect local papers to carry this information, regardless of the cost, which drives up the price of independent newspapers. Furthermore, before a newspaper may increase the rate it charges for its papers, it must first complete the complicated process of obtaining permission from a government committee.

¶10. (C) The GOB also ordered government agencies and enterprises to stop running ads in independent media. State media and radio stations were ordered to discontinue the

purchase of news stories from the independent media. As a further step, the GOB began using tax audits and fire inspections to intimidate private companies to stop running ads in the independent media. The loss of these sources of revenue permanently undermined the self-sustainability of many newspapers and online news agencies. Igor Vysotskiy, Editor-in-Chief of BelGazeta, noted that the GOB also continues to deny permission for him to advertise at sporting or cultural events, as this would increase recognition and circulation of his paper.

¶11. (C) In the last few years personal civil lawsuits against independent media, backed informally by the GOB, have become quite common. Yuliya Slutskaya stated that such a suit cost her the job of editor-in-chief of KP. (Note: A GOB official, Giorgi Kusel, initiated a USD 500,000 lawsuit against KP after it ran an article detailing a criminal case against him. Kusel dropped his suit when Slutskaya left the paper. End note.) Svetlana Kalinkina noted that a similar lawsuit nearly closed Narodnaya Volya permanently. A similar case resulted in the brief closing of Svobodnyye Novosti for several weeks in 1997, but editor Vasiliy Zhadaniuk said that he was able to reopen the paper by changing its name slightly.

Self-Censorship

¶12. (C) Most editors stated that they maintain a constant awareness of how they word what they write in order to avoid direct confrontation with the GOB. Many re-read articles before sending them to print to determine if they have written anything that they personally feel will displease the government. Some even have lawyers look over articles they perceive as especially sensitive. Several editors noted that the GOB uses any lapse in professionalism, no matter how slight, to full advantage. Most editors also stated that they either treat articles on Lukashenko's personal life or family with the greatest caution, or refrain from writing on the subject altogether.

Common Problems

¶13. (C) Most editors commented that they suffer from understaffing and cannot afford to pay their journalists nearly what state media does. One editor commented that Lukashenko understands what keeps him in power, and provides monetary compensation to state media accordingly. The relatively high wages that "Radio Liberty", "Ratsiya", and "Radio Europe for Belarus" pay has also enticed some of the best journalists to take jobs outside Belarus, further

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depleting the Belarusian cadre of independent journalists. These factors have led to a shortage of qualified independent journalists and driven up wages.

Comment

¶14. (C) Editors pointed out that the GOB could close down the independent media today with existing laws if it wanted. The GOB has likely chosen not to do so for the simple reason that it has already so crippled the influence of the independent media that it no longer poses a significant threat to the regime. We would add that the presence of a handful of independent outlets provides the regime some (albeit extremely weak) basis for claiming that free press exists in Belarus. It is clear that apart from BelGazeta and KP, which have significant Russian backing, most independent media would likely cease to exist without U.S. and Western support.

It is encouraging that despite the blatant GOB pressure, independent media outlets remain committed to providing Belarusians a more accurate assessment of developments in Lukashenko's Belarus.

Moore